

General Ethics

Samuel Murray

Office Hours: **R 1:30 – 3:30**

By appointment

Email: smurray7@providence.edu

Course description

How should we live together? How do the people around us shape our view of right and wrong? This course examines both questions.

Course texts

Two books are required for this course (you received more in your box, but due to some changes in how I want to teach the course, only the following will be used):

- Bail, C. 2021. *Breaking the Social Media Prism* (Princeton)
- Mason, L. 2018. *Uncivil Agreement: How politics became our identity* (Chicago)

Other readings will be made available on the Canvas page for the course.

Assessment

Attendance (5%): This is a simple 1 or 0 in the gradebook. Excused absences will require proper documentation. Part of the attendance grade is attending either the Patel talk (February 6) or the Henrich talk (February 13) that are part of the Humanities forum. If you cannot attend either event, let me know and I can provide alternative events that will count for attendance.

Campus-wide survey (10%): You are responsible for collecting responses from 11 students (you count as one of the students, so it's really 10 responses) on a campus-wide assessment of attitudes on campus about free speech, polarization, and other issues. These must be distinct responses (i.e., you and your friend cannot each collect a response from the same person). I will distribute the survey link in an email. Once you get 10 responses, you get full credit!

Megastudy presentation (20%; *Week of Mar. 17 - 21*): In teams of 4, you will select one of the interventions from the Stanford megastudy to present on in class. Your team will discuss: (a) what the intervention is, (b) how effective the intervention is, (c) why the intervention works, and (d) ways that the intervention could be scaled up or practically applied. You will present your summary to class in a presentation that should take no more than 15 min. More details—including rubric—will be provided later in the semester.

Campus mediation write-up (10%): Select a scenario that presents a fictionalized version of political conflict at Providence College (these are available on Canvas). Diagnose what each party to the dispute wants, why this has led to conflict, and what can be done to find a compromise. Be sure to enumerate the steps that you would advise for each group, assess potential shortcomings or difficulties that might emerge, and describe how you would encourage “buy-in” from all parties.

Organizational profile (10%): With your group of four, find an organization that works on promoting civility or depolarization within the United States. Prepare an organizational profile, noting the priorities of the organization and recent investments. Please include the following in your profile: (1) identify potential areas of growth for the organization based on their recent work, (2) list programs that could be implemented at Providence College to help with civility and inclusion, and; (3) explore ways to scale programs to potentially address a wider audience (e.g., scaling a community program into a state-wide program). See the last page of the syllabus for a list of programs (if you have another idea for an organization to profile, please let me know in advance!)

Unify America Challenge (15%): You will participate in the Unify America challenge, which takes place at the end of February or beginning of March. This includes having a 1-hr. conversation with a student at another institution (over Zoom) that is ideologically different than you. More details will be provided in the coming weeks.

Final exam (30%): There will be a cumulative final exam at the end of the semester. A study guide will be distributed beforehand. This will be an open note exam.

Academic Integrity

All students pledge to abide by the guidelines on academic integrity outlined in the *Undergraduate Catalogue* (in the aptly titled section “Academic Integrity”). Violations of the policy will result in referrals to Fr. Nowel’s office.

Classroom procedure

Electronic devices are not permitted in class. On rare occasions, this rule might be suspended, but your default presumption should be that laptops, tablets, phones, and so on are not needed during class.

I expect you to read and reflect on the assignment before class and be willing to engage in classroom discussion.

SCHEDULE

*Any changes to the schedule will be announced in class!

<i>Week</i>	Monday	Wednesday	Friday
Jan. 13 – 17	<i>Introduction</i>	<i>What is affective polarization?</i> Iyengar et al., 2019 “The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States” Finkel et al. 2020 “Political sectarianism in the US”	<i>Measurement issues</i> Bakker & Lelkes, 2024 “Putting the affect in affective polarization” Druckman & Levendusky, 2019 “What do we measure when we measure polarization?”

<i>Week</i>	Monday	Wednesday	Friday
Jan. 20 – 24	MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY <i>No class</i>	<i>What is the problem?</i> Boxell et al. 2022 “Cross-country trends in affective polarization” Westwood et al. 2018, “The tie that divides”	<i>Explanations: Ideology I</i> Orr et al., 2020 “The policy basis of measured partisan animosity in the United States”
Jan. 27 – 31	<i>Explanations: Ideology II</i> Costa, 2021 “Ideology not affect”	<i>Explanations: Ideology III</i> Singer et al. 2019 “Rational social political polarization”	<i>Explanations: Identity I</i> Mason, <i>Uncivil Agreement</i> ch. 1 & 2
Feb. 3 – 7	<i>Explanations: Identity II</i> Mason, <i>Uncivil Agreement</i> ch. 4 & 5	<i>Explanations: Identity III</i> Mason, <i>Uncivil Agreement</i> ch. 6 & 7	<i>Explanations: Identity IV</i> Mason, <i>Uncivil Agreement</i> ch. 8
Feb. 10 – 14	<i>Detour</i> [Follow-up on last section of Mason]	<i>Introduction to Bayesianism</i> No reading	<i>Group polarization I</i> Sunstein, 1999 “The law of group polarization”
Feb. 17 – 21	SAM AT FLORIDA <i>No class</i>	<i>Cross-party interaction</i> Unify America facilitation guide	<i>Campus survey results</i>
Feb. 24 – 28	<i>Rational Polarization I</i> The central puzzle	<i>Rational Polarization II</i> Ambiguous evidence	<i>Rational Polarization III</i> The rationality of confirmation bias
Mar. 3 – 7	<i>Rational Polarization IV</i> How arguments persuade and polarize	<i>Bayesianism in the wild</i> Young et al., 2025, “Belief polarization can be caused by disagreements over source independence”	SAM AT UNC <i>No class</i>
Mar. 10 – 14	SPRING BREAK <i>No class</i>	SPRING BREAK <i>No class</i>	SPRING BREAK <i>No class</i>
Mar. 17 – 21	<i>Media introduction</i> Levy, 2021 “Social media, news consumption, and polarization”	<i>Explanations: Media I</i> Jost et al., 2022 “Cognitive-motivational mechanisms of political polarization in social-communicative contexts”	<i>Explanations: Media II</i> Bail, 2021 <i>Breaking the social media prism</i> , ch. 1 - 3
Mar. 24 – 28	<i>Explanations: Media III</i> Bail, 2021 <i>Breaking the social media prism</i> , ch. 4 – 6	<i>Explanations: Media IV</i> Bail, 2021 <i>Breaking the social media prism</i> , ch. 7 – 9	<i>Containment</i> Talisce, 2024 <i>Civic Solitude</i> ch. 4

<i>Week</i>	Monday	Wednesday	Friday
Mar. 31 – Apr 4	<i>Ideology</i> Moller, 2024 “Keeping ideology in its place”	<i>Interventions I</i> Hartman et al. 2022, “Interventions to reduce partisan animosity”	<i>Interventions II</i> Murray, “The ideology of affect”
Apr. 7 – 11	<i>The megastudy I</i> Voelkel et al., 2023 “Megastudy identifying successful interventions to strengthen Americans’ democratic attitudes”	<i>The megastudy II</i> Voelkel et al., 2023 “Megastudy identifying successful interventions to strengthen Americans’ democratic attitudes”	<i>The megastudy III</i> Voelkel et al., 2023 “Megastudy identifying successful interventions to strengthen Americans’ democratic attitudes”
Apr. 14 – 18	<i>Empathy I</i> Read, 2022 “When and why to empathize with political opponents”	<i>Empathy II</i> Sodoma and Sharp, “Democratic empathy and affective polarization”	GOOD FRIDAY <i>No class</i>
Apr. 21 – 25	EASTER BREAK <i>No class</i>	<i>Empathy III</i> Bailey, 2022 “Empathy and the value of humane understanding”	<i>Empathy IV</i> Srji, 2021 “Outrage and the bounds of empathy”
Apr. 28 – May 2	<i>Empathy V</i> Sinnott-Armstrong, <i>Think again</i> (selections)	<i>Civility</i> Levendusky & Stecula, 2021 “We need to talk”	<i>Moving forward</i> Dorst, “Ideological Bayesians”

Sample programs for organizational profile

Braver Angels

BridgeUSA

Collaborative Discussion Project

College Debates and Discourse Alliance

Constructive Dialogue Institute

Essential Partners

Everyday Democracy

Greater Good Science Center

Heterodox Academy

Institute for Citizen and Scholars

Interfaith America Bridging the Gap Project

Living Room Conversations

National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation

National Issues Forum

Sustained Dialogue Institute

The Better Arguments Project

The Discussion Project

Unify America